

Don't overlook safe turkey-handling practices for a happy holiday

22 November 2013



Cook a turkey to the right temperature. UDSA suggests that the bird gets to at least 165 F -- better if over 172 F for chewing. Use a thermometer to monitor the temperature. Credit: Penn State

Thanksgiving is a time for sharing: good food, family time, friendship and memories. But one thing you don't want to share, warns a food-safety expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences, is pathogenic bacteria.

"As you prepare your Thanksgiving dinner, it is important to remember some key food-safety rules when it comes to cooking and serving turkey," said Martin Bucknavage, extension food-safety specialist. "We don't want to spread pathogenic bacteria, such as Salmonella and Campylobacter."

He offers some advice to keep cooks, helpers and guests safe when preparing a turkey:

There is no need to wash the outside of your turkey. Proper cooking will take care of any pathogenic bacteria that may be present.

"The only thing you will achieve by washing the outside of the turkey is spreading bacteria in your kitchen. This can occur as the water splashes or drips across your kitchen counter, potentially carrying bacteria with it," Bucknavage said.

Clean as you go when handling raw turkey.

"As people move the raw turkey around in the kitchen, they treat it more like a football than a raw piece of meat, in that it touches a lot of surfaces including the hands," he said. "Because of this, there is the potential to get pathogenic bacteria on our hands, on the counter and on the cutting board. Therefore, clean these surfaces immediately after coming in contact with the raw bird."

Cook it to the right temperature. UDSA suggests that the bird gets to at least 165 F, (best if over 172 F for chewing). So Bucknavage recommends the use of a thermometer to monitor the temperature.

"Check the [temperature](#) of the bird in a number of spots, including the breast meat and the thickest part of the thigh," he said. "Allow time for further cooking if the temperature is not met."

Cook your stuffing separately. If you stuff the bird, the temperature of the stuffing must also get to 165 F.

"In order to get the stuffing to the right temperature, the bird will reach much higher temperatures, often over 185 F, making it very dry. Too often, people will stop cooking once the bird is at the right temperature, but unfortunately, they end up having undercooked stuffing," Bucknavage said.

"Because this stuffing was inside the raw bird, it absorbed turkey juice potentially carrying [pathogenic bacteria](#) such as Salmonella and Campylobacter. Undercooking the stuffing lets those bacteria survive. It is much better, and safer,

to cook them separately. You will get the right temperature in the turkey without having to overcook it, and you'll get the right temperature in the stuffing."

If you want the look of a stuffed turkey on your table, stuff it before serving, after both have been properly cooked, he advised.

Handle leftovers immediately after dinner. Do not allow the turkey to sit on the table for hours after everyone is done eating.

"Bacteria such as Staphylococcus aureus can grow on meat items if left out for a long period of time," Bucknavage said. "To prevent that from occurring, it is important to handle leftovers right away. Cut up the turkey, put it in a container or sealable bag, and then refrigerate or freeze."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

APA citation: Don't overlook safe turkey-handling practices for a happy holiday (2013, November 22) retrieved 30 September 2020 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-11-dont-overlook-safe-turkey-handling-happy.html>

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